Number Three

CRIMINAL™

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image®

by
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Bad Weekend

Part Two

image

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Saturday

I feel like I'm not giving you a fair picture of Hal Crane.

I'm talking like he's just this string of bad luck and drunken rage... But there was more to him than that.

So let me tell you my favorite memory of Hal.

It was just before Christmas, 1988, and we were pulling an all-nighter finishing a story for ***Tomb of Unknown Horror***...

I was filling in blacks, and inking some of the backgrounds - all the boring stuff - and Hal was finishing everything else.

On tight deadlines, it was a nightmare trying to keep up with him.

He was about 60 then, but he could still go ***days*** without sleep when he was inking...

I'd be running on fumes, and with each page Hal somehow seemed ***more*** awake... more energized.

We finished around 4:30 in the morning.

I could tell Hal was happy with how this one had turned out and I felt a swell of pride that kind of surprised me.

Then he said -

HEY KID... YOU WANNA SEE SOMETHING?

And he took me down the stairs into his house...

...To his library, which was strictly ***off-limits*** to assistants.

Now, this was just a few weeks before I quit working for Hal and he was ***far*** from my favorite person at this point.

It's funny how fast that can happen when you get to know your heroes...

Because when I got that assistant job, I was sure it was going to be the best thing that ever happened to me.

See, I'd never done too well with people. I had friends, sure, but even they made me feel anxious and alienated most of the time.

My whole life, my happiest days were the ones I spent alone with my books and comics.

Those were my ***real*** friends... The ones that helped me escape all the thoughts spinning around in my head.

SNAKE MAN

And from the first time I saw his name in the credits - in ***SWORD of the SAVAGE #54*** - Hal Crane was one of my favorite artists.

I was always trying to draw like him... Or rereading his ***fanzine*** interviews from the '60s and '70s.

This was a huge part of my childhood.

I knew he wasn't the same guy from those old interviews when I went to work for him, but I still had stars in my eyes anyway.

I was going to study with the ***master***... So what if he was kind of a crotchety old man now? So were all the teachers in ***kung fu*** movies.

I ***KNOW***, MINDY... I'M ***SORRY***.

LOOK, I'LL DO MY BEST TO MAKE SURE HE GETS TO THE ***AWARDS CEREMONY***, OKAY?

YOUR ***BEST*** -- ?!

But the reality of Hal wiped those stars away pretty quickly...

If things hadn't been so ***screwed up*** back at home, I might've quit right away.

Instead I was stuck in a room with a guy I'd grown up worshipping, seeing what was left of him...

The bitter drunken rants about publishers and editors and studio bosses who lied and ripped him off...

The fights with his ex-wives over alimony payments...

Soaking his hands in ice at the end of the day...

I started thinking that a 60-year-old man still having to pull all-nighters was more sad than anything.

IS IT ALL SET?

WE'LL SEE... MY FRIEND'S GONNA MEET US FOR LUNCH...

Anyway, so Hal led me into his library, which was impressive.

Walls lined with art books, old pulp magazines, paperback crime novels right next to great works of literature... Shakespeare, Dickens, Cervantes.

But what he wanted to show me was locked inside a cabinet across the room.

His real treasure...

His newspaper strip collection.

STAR KING

They were big clothbound books, and pasted into them were daily strips and Sunday pages from the comics Hal had loved as a child.

Terry and the Pirates, Jungle Jackson, Scorchy Smith, Captain Easy... and Star King.

My exposure to newspaper strips up until then was pretty limited... and Hal knew that.

So he poured himself a drink and started showing me his favorite sequences... Telling me about the characters...

...SO MAX KING IS A SPACE PILOT WHO GETS PULLED THROUGH A VORTEX INTO ANOTHER GALAXY...

And as he talked, I could see that kid inside of him, still.

The one who carefully cut his favorite strips from the paper every day and glued them into books that he saved for his entire life.

The kid who survived the Depression by disappearing into magic and mystery and tales of wonder.

STAR KING

By Archie Lewi

It was really something, to see that there was still some joy inside Hal...

Even if it was wistful and nostalgic.

...AND THEN MAX AND PRINCESS LILAH BECAME *SPACE PIRATES* FOR THE NEXT TWO YEARS...

Eventually, he fell asleep while I was looking at one of the books, so I threw a blanket on him and went home...

And the next day it was like none of it had happened.

He was back to treating me like an unwanted stepchild who couldn't even rule ***panel borders*** correctly.

But still, that's my favorite memory of Hal.

LOOK... JUST FOLLOW MY ***LEAD*** IN HERE, OKAY?

WE DON'T WANT TO TELL RICKY ANYTHING HE DOESN'T ***NEED*** TO KNOW.

YOU DON'T ***TRUST*** HIM?

NO, I ***DO***... I JUST...

I ***KNOW*** HIM, TOO.

...SO WHAT KIND OF BUILDING AM I LOOKING AT?

IS THERE A *DOORMAN* OR A FRONT DESK... OR...?

NOT THAT I RECALL... BUT I WAS ONLY *THERE* ONCE...

OKAY... SO WHAT *DO* YOU RECALL?

I THINK WE CALLED UP FROM THE FRONT DOOR AND HE *BUZZED* US IN...

HE'S ON THE THIRD FLOOR...

APARTMENT *3-G*, LIKE THE COMIC STRIP.

OKAY... THAT'S GOOD.

SHOULD BE NO PROBLEM THEN...

Ricky Lawless was one of those ***friends*** I mentioned before, the ones who made me so anxious.

I'd known him since we were kids, and he'd ***always*** been a thief...

Houses, shops, cars... Ricky didn't care, he'd break into anything.

I was constantly worried he was going to get me arrested as an accomplice, long before I ***actually*** was one.

SO WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR WHEN I GET INSIDE?

SOME OF MY OLD PAGES, BUT THIS GUY HAS SO MUCH ART, YOU'LL NEVER FIND THEM...

I'LL HAVE TO COME IN AFTER YOU DISABLE HIS ALARM...

WE CAN GO UP THE BACK STAIRS IF THERE'S ***CAMERAS*** AT THE FRONT.

YOU'RE COMING... REALLY?

IT'S NOT ***FORT KNOX***... IT'S AN APARTMENT.

WE'LL BE IN AND OUT IN FIVE MINUTES.

SO WHAT'S THE DEAL, THIS GUY'S A ***COLLECTOR?*** IS HE ***RICH?***

YEAH, HE'S PRETTY RICH...

HE WROTE THAT ***CHRISTMAS*** MOVIE... THE ONE WHERE THE KID PUKES ON SANTA?

OH YEAH, I SAW THE *TRAILER* FOR THAT.

I could practically hear the wheels turning in Ricky's mind now...

And I instantly regretted calling him.

SO LOOK... WHAT IF WE GET UP THERE AND WE CAN'T FIND YOUR SHIT BECAUSE IT'S INSIDE SOME SAFE?

OH... YEAH... I GUESS THAT'S *POSSIBLE*...

WE DON'T WANT TO GO TO ALL THIS EFFORT TO HIT A BRICK WALL, Y'KNOW?

SO, *WHAT*... YOU DON'T WANT TO DO IT?

NO, I WANT TO DO IT *RIGHT NOW*, WHILE THE GUY'S STILL *HOME*...

SO I CAN GET HIM TO OPEN HIS FUCKING *SAFE*.

Of course he would make it more dangerous...

That was who he was.

The problem with Ricky was that his dad had been a legend, and not in a good way.

WHO IS IT?

UPS... GOT A PACKAGE FOR A DAVID MANDRILL...

I NEED A SIGNATURE.

Teeg Lawless was scary, unpredictable, and violent...

BZZZZ

And until he took a bullet to the head, most of us figured he was *unkillable*.

His death and the trouble that came after it was what I'd been running away from when I went to work for Hal.

But Ricky had stayed here and spent the past ten years trying to live up to the family reputation.

He would never be his dad -- he was ***smarter***, for one thing...

Which made him a better thief.

But he sure as hell wanted people to know he was his father's son.

And that just like Teeg...

KNNK KNK

3-G

...He wasn't afraid of anything.

HOLY SHIT -- !

LET'S KEEP THAT VOICE DOWN, OKAY?

ALL RIGHT, OLD MAN, HAVE A LOOK AROUND... IT'S ALL CLEAR.

WHERE'S THE GUY?

WHAT'D YOU *DO* TO HIM?

RELAX... HE'S IN HERE...

SEE?

IS SOMEONE ELSE *THERE?*

SHUT UP, *DAVE.*

THE SAFE'S IN A WALK-IN CLOSET DOWN HERE... BUNCH OF ART AND STUFF IN THERE...

COUPLE ENVELOPES OF CASH, BUT I HAVEN'T COUNTED THEM YET.

WE'RE NOT HERE FOR HIS *MONEY.*

MAYBE *YOU* AREN'T...

GOD DAMN IT...
WHERE ARE THEY...
HANG ON -
HERE WE GO.
OH, WHAT THE FUCK?!
WHAT IS IT?
JUST SOME SHIT I DID IN THE '70S...
NOT WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR.
I NEED TO TALK TO DAVID...
UH... THAT'S NOT SUCH A GREAT IDEA, MAN...
I DON'T CARE.

HEY... WHAT'S GOING ON...?

HAL? YOU BROKE INTO MY HOUSE?

YOU BOUGHT SOME PAGES FROM MY DAUGHTER.

THEY WERE STOLEN AND I WANT THEM BACK.

GIVE THE MAN WHAT HE WANTS, DAVE.

HAL, YOU KNOW - I WOULD NEVER -

HE DOESN'T CARE. WHERE'S THE STUFF?

IN THE SAFE! THEY'RE IN THE SAFE!

IT'S YOUR FIRST ZANGAR STORY... I HAVEN'T GOTTEN IT FRAMED YET BUT -

THAT'S ALL THAT SHE SOLD YOU?

CAN HE PLEASE STOP AIMING THAT AT ME?

ARE YOU TELLING THE TRUTH?

YES!!

WELL... SHIT.

We untie David Mandrill and Ricky convinces him it's better if he just ***forgets*** this little burglary ever happened...

I don't trust it, but the idea of Ricky coming back someday clearly scares the shit out of him.

He even apologizes to Hal as we're leaving.

...YOU KNOW HOW ***CHARLES DICKENS*** FIRST GOT FAMOUS...?

ON THE BACK OF A ***CARTOONIST.***

ROBERT SEYMOUR WAS SO POPULAR THAT HIS PUBLISHER WANTED TO PUT OUT A ***MONTHLY MAGAZINE*** OF HIS DRAWINGS...

THEY JUST NEEDED A ***HACK WRITER*** TO TAKE HIS ART AND ADD SOME WORDS.

HELL... DICKENS WASN'T EVEN THEIR ***FIRST CHOICE.***

BUT WHAT DOES HE ***DO?*** HE TAKES OVER THE WHOLE ENTERPRISE...

STARTS MAKING SEYMOUR DRAW WHAT ***HE*** WANTS HIM TO, GIVING HIM TONS OF NOTES...

THE USUAL ***WRITER*** BULLSHIT...

IT WAS THE MAN'S ***DREAM*** GIG... AND SUDDENLY IT'S A NIGHTMARE...

SEYMOUR BLEW HIS OWN ***BRAINS*** OUT BEFORE HE EVEN FINISHED THE SECOND ISSUE...

AND DICKENS WENT ON TO FAME AND FORTUNE... AND ***IMMORTALITY.***

Hal was drinking away his disappointment, so of course it was time for the Dickens speech... I'd heard it before.

Pretty soon he'd get to Jack Cole... And poor Joe Shuster... Maybe even Archie Lewis...

Comics' ***casualties***... A long line that he must've been certain he'd be joining...

Like he felt its gravity pulling him in.

HEY, MAYBE WE SHOULD CLOSE THE TAB HERE...

WHAT... ***WHY?***

I GOTTA GET YOU BACK TO YOUR HOTEL IF YOU'RE GONNA ***CHANGE*** BEFORE THE CEREMONY...

AHH... I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THAT THING...

NO. HAL, YOU ARE NOT SKIPPING THE AWARDS SHOW.

MINDY WILL KILL ME... SERIOUSLY.

COME ON, KID... WHAT DOES IT MATTER, REALLY?

AN AWARD FOR SPENDING MY ENTIRE LIFE BENT OVER A DRAWING TABLE...

...WITH NOTHING TO SHOW FOR IT, JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER GUY THEY SCREWED...

YOU KNOW WHAT WALLY WOOD SAID?

HERE WE GO...

HE SAID IF HE HAD TO DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN, HE'D CUT OFF HIS OWN GODDAMN HANDS...

I DON'T KNOW, MAN...

I NEVER WATCHED THAT STUPID CARTOON YOU MADE, BUT I ALWAYS DUG YOUR COMICS.

EVEN MY DAD LIKED THOSE ISSUES OF ZANGAR YOU DREW...

YOU KNOW I WROTE THE *STORY* FOR THOSE TOO... BUT *MARV* CHANGED ALL THE DIALOG AND FUCKED IT UP.

AND YOU'RE *STILL* PISSED ABOUT IT TWENTY YEARS LATER... OBVIOUSLY YOU *CARE*, HAL.

JUST GO ACCEPT THE *AWARD*.

I'M NOT GETTING UP THERE AND PLAYING *NICE* SO THE PUBLISHERS CAN FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES...

LIKE THIS RACKET ISN'T A *RACKET*...

SO THEN *DON'T*, MAN...

GO UP THERE AND SHIT ALL OVER THEM.

HELL, *I'D* EVEN GO WATCH THAT... IT'D BE AMAZING.

WAIT -- WOULD I HAVE TO PUT ON A *SUIT*?

YEAH... IF YOU'RE GONNA SIT AT *MY* TABLE, YOU DO.

To Ricky's credit, he did convince the old bastard to actually *go* to the event he'd been flown out here for...

But remember what I said before about not throwing fuel on a drunken maniac?

And Hal kept drinking right through the ceremony, of course... While I just felt this creeping sense of doom.

All these old "friends" stopping over to say hi had no idea what they were in for... That they were about to become part of the legend of Hal Crane.

GREAT TO SEEYA, HAL...

THANKS, WILL.

By the time Mindy comes to get him for his award, my nerves are so bad that I'm drinking the hard stuff, too.

And Ricky's just... amused, by all of it.

Keeps leaning over to ask me who people *are* when they win.

Then, right before they call them up to the stage, I see Hal and his old boss ***Frank Harmony*** talking...

And they look like two ***old pals*** burying the hatchet.

Hal lets Frank pat him on the shoulder a few times and they even shake hands.

But when Frank gets up to introduce him...

...TO SAY HE'S A GENIUS, THAT HE WAS NEARLY WITHOUT PEER... IS NOT ENOUGH...

...Hal just ***glares***...

NO, THE MAN WE HONOR ***TONIGHT*** IS ONE OF THE BEST TO EVER PUT PEN TO BOARD...

And I know what's coming next is going to be really ugly.

...SO PLEASE HELP ME WELCOME A ***TRUE*** GRANDMASTER OF THE ART FORM... ***HAL CRANE.***

But maybe the applause surprises him... Or the standing ovation.

Because whatever he was planning to say...

Whatever dirt he was going to bring up...

He doesn't.

Instead, he clears his throat, and he gives the acceptance speech everyone in the room really wanted to hear...

He talks about growing up reading the funnies... Dreaming of a life in four-color newsprint.

He talks about how lucky he was to be mentored by so many great artists...

And how much luckier still, that he got to spend fifty years doing the thing he loved most in the world.

I almost can't believe it.

And even Ricky Lawless seems touched.

But then... as the crowd is applauding him again...

Hal turns around and ***breaks*** Frank Harmony's jaw...

KRAAAK

Ricky's laughter is the only thing I can hear above the chaos that follows...

As the whole room goes nuts trying to get to the stage.

And somehow - stupidly - I manage to put ***myself*** between Hal and Frank's security man...

...Who has a ***taser***.

GA -- AAHH -- !

BCPD

SO... GOOD SPEECH, I GUESS.

THANKS.

WHAT HAPPENED...?

IT LOOKED LIKE YOU AND FRANK WERE MENDING FENCES.

WE WERE... HE OFFERED ME FIFTY GRAND AS A BONUS, FOR THAT NEW PRINCESS YAZ SHOW.

THAT'S GREAT... ISN'T IT?

Pfft... A "BONUS."

WHAT A PRICK.

HEY, DID YOU REALLY QUIT DRAWING?

YOU WERE GOOD... YOU SHOULD STICK WITH IT.

I THOUGHT YOU SAID COMICS WAS *DYING?*

COMICS HAVE BEEN DYING SINCE *1954*, KID...

DON'T LET *THAT* STOP YOU...

This, right here, was my favorite moment of the weekend...

And I probably should've left it at that... Just stopped talking.

But I *had* to ask the question...

SO WHAT WERE THOSE *PAGES* YOU WERE LOOKING FOR?

SOME STUFF I DREW BACK WHEN I WAS WORKING FOR *ARCHIE LEWIS*...

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT...

IT'S JUST A *MISTAKE* I MADE... ONE OF *MANY*, RIGHT?

BUT I WANTED TO KEEP *THIS ONE* TO MYSELF...

IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN.

I just had to be sure.

YEAH, OKAY...

Sunday

See, someone once referred to Hal Crane as "a master without a masterpiece" but that wasn't actually true...

There *was* a masterpiece, it's just that only a handful of people had ever seen it...
And only on Hal's most drunken, self-pitying nights.
That's when he got *confessional*... When he told you his secrets.

Like the *real story* of Archie Lewis's death.

I can still hear his voice, cracking with emotion... As he brought these pages out to show me...
STARKING

Hal had only been inking backgrounds on ***STAR KING*** for a month or two when the syndicate approached him.

Archie was demanding a raise and a piece of ownership, so they figured it was time to put the old man out to pasture.

And they wanted Hal to take over the strip, if they liked his ***samples***.

So for the next month, Hal worked his day job, then stayed up late into the night putting together eight weeks of dailies and Sundays.

He knew he should have hated himself for what he was doing to Archie, but he didn't.

In fact, he'd never been happier in his life.

Even the writing came easy, as if ***Max King*** and ***Princess Lilah*** themselves were telling him what happened next.

He told himself maybe Archie would be happy it was someone like him who took over...

Someone who really knew and loved the strip... Who could do it justice...

If he could just show Archie his pages, maybe he wouldn't see them as a betrayal.

But Hal knew that wasn't true... and when someone at the agency tipped off Archie, he took Hal for a ride and drove straight into a wall.

Hal doesn't remember telling me all this... Which makes me wonder how many times he's gone searching for his ***missing*** art.

But that night he cried about poor old Archie Lewis... and he begged me to take these pages away and throw them on a fire.

These strips were the best thing he'd ever drawn... And he couldn't bring himself to destroy them, even though ***they*** had destroyed him.

And I got it... I understood every part of what he did, including his shame.

So I promised Hal I would burn his masterpiece for him...

STARKING

BY HAL CRANE

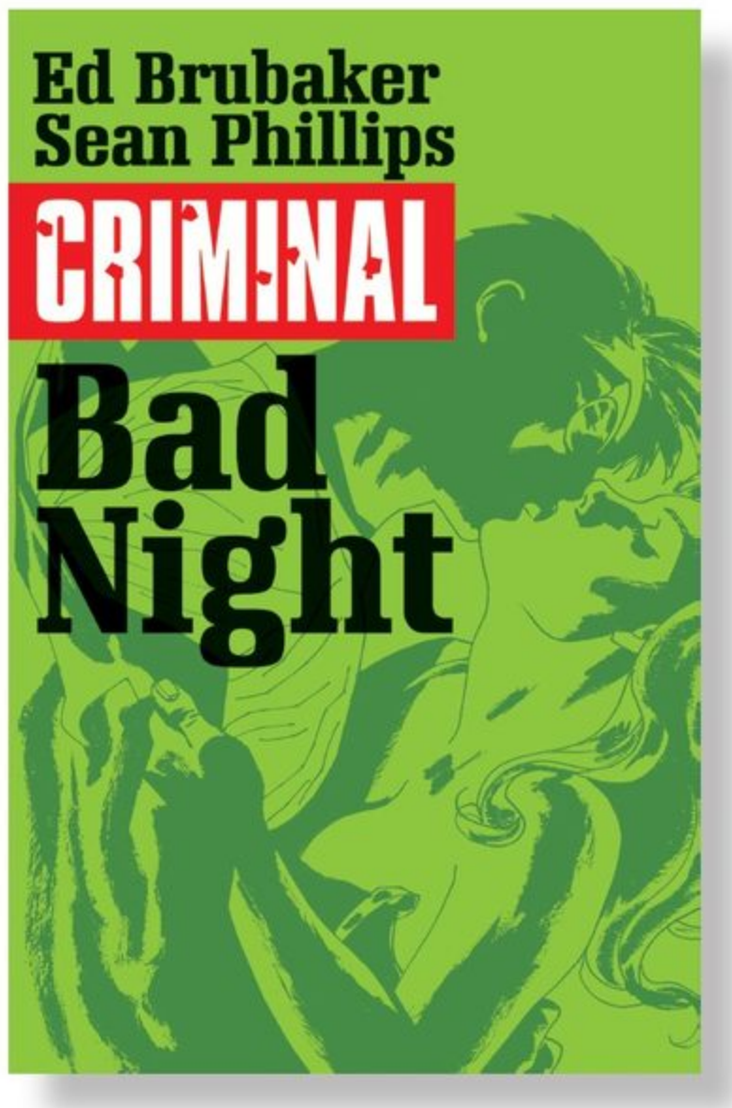
And maybe someday I will.

Maybe.

Okay, I hope you enjoyed the wrap-up of this two-part story. I'm really pleased with how it turned out, and Sean and Jake just killed it on the art, even drawing a bunch of extra pages to make it all fit.

For those who don't know, our narrator Jacob Kurtz also stars in BAD NIGHT, which takes place about ten years after this story. I made sure not to have this story be full of "prequel" nods, so nothing about that book is spoiled here, other than Jacob's cartooning career. Personally, prequel-nods, like *"Oh hey, Darth Vader made C3P0 when he was a kid"* tend to ruin stuff for me, so I try as hard as possible to make sure even when we jump around in time like this, we're not doing things like that.

The Secret Ingredient is Crime



Some of you have written in asking which details of this story are Easter Eggs to real comics history, which is a complicated question to answer. Hal isn't based on anyone in particular, if anything, he's inspired by four or five people I've known throughout my life, in comics and outside. But bits and pieces of his history are lifted from real things I've heard about various artists of his era - Things like Julius Schwartz's legendary fight with Alex Toth in the 50s, and there was a very famous comics artist who got badly into debt because of gambling and was known to steal original art from editors' desks to pay off his debts. And it's certainly not hard to find comics people of that era (or this one) who had drinking problems or broken marriages or who were wildly inappropriate or even lecherous to women - again, see Julius Schwartz, famously. Or ones who created things we grew up loving who ended their lives broke, owning nothing they drew or wrote. I mean, that's the majority of the comics artists from the 1930s thru now, really.

And of course, the Archie Lewis car crash in the 50s, which Hal survived, is inspired (loosely again) by the death of Alex Raymond. Back in the early 90s I had a friend who had once shared studio space with Stan Drake – the passenger in Raymond's car, who did not walk away unscathed, like Hal did in our story. My friend's sad stories about Drake, who was one of the all-time greats, and ended his career drawing BLONDIE in a style totally unlike his own, always stuck with me. And that's probably where the initial germ of this story started, like 25 years ago.

Again -- Not that Hal is any of these people, but those are some of the Easter Eggs.

***

Okay, let's do some letters. First up is longtime reader/letter writer Bruce Marsh…

Loving the curveball change of pace with the young artist fan looking after the old alcoholic comic book artist, reminiscent of that fine Peter O'Toole movie, MY FAVORITE YEAR. You also referenced the Jack Kirby art thefts and his young assistant Mark Evanier. The story was grounded in reality by the peppering of real comic professionals' names among the fictional characters, but the death crash of Archie Lewis really struck a chord. Based on Alex Raymond's crash which killed him and injured Stan Drake in September 1956 and dissected obsessively by Dave Sim in cartoon form a few years back.

The throwaway mentions of those tragic mistreated comic book greats, Jack Cole and Wally Wood. It's these touches that lend CRIMINAL verisimilitude. After years of searching I've just bought a signed print by the brilliant Wallace Wood for $75. I couldn't afford his original art but I'm overjoyed to have the great man's signature. His Daredevil was my favourite, not to mention his fantastic satirical work for Mad.

Kim Morgan just gets underneath the skin of movies. I've seen ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES so many times but Kim always spots something that I've missed or taken for granted. "Chuck your chest up to the wood." I've dug out the dvd to watch later and there'll be tears for Rocky/Cagney's selfless "cowardice" as he walks the last mile. Is Sean's illustration of Cagney and the Dead End Kids for sale?

Be seeing you,

Bruce Marsh
Newbury Park
England

Good question about Sean's art… I'll let him reply to that part:

My art is available from Mark Hay at www.splashpageart.com although that piece might have already sold. Signed prints of some of my illustrations and covers are available from seanphillips.bigcartel.com - Sean

Back to your letter -- Kirby probably had more art stolen than just about anyone else, but back in those days lots of popular artists' pages went missing. I don't think I referenced Mark Evanier anywhere, although one of the only writing classes I ever took was a seminar he gave at Comicon when I was a teenager. It was great.

***

Next up, we have one from Cicero Tweed…

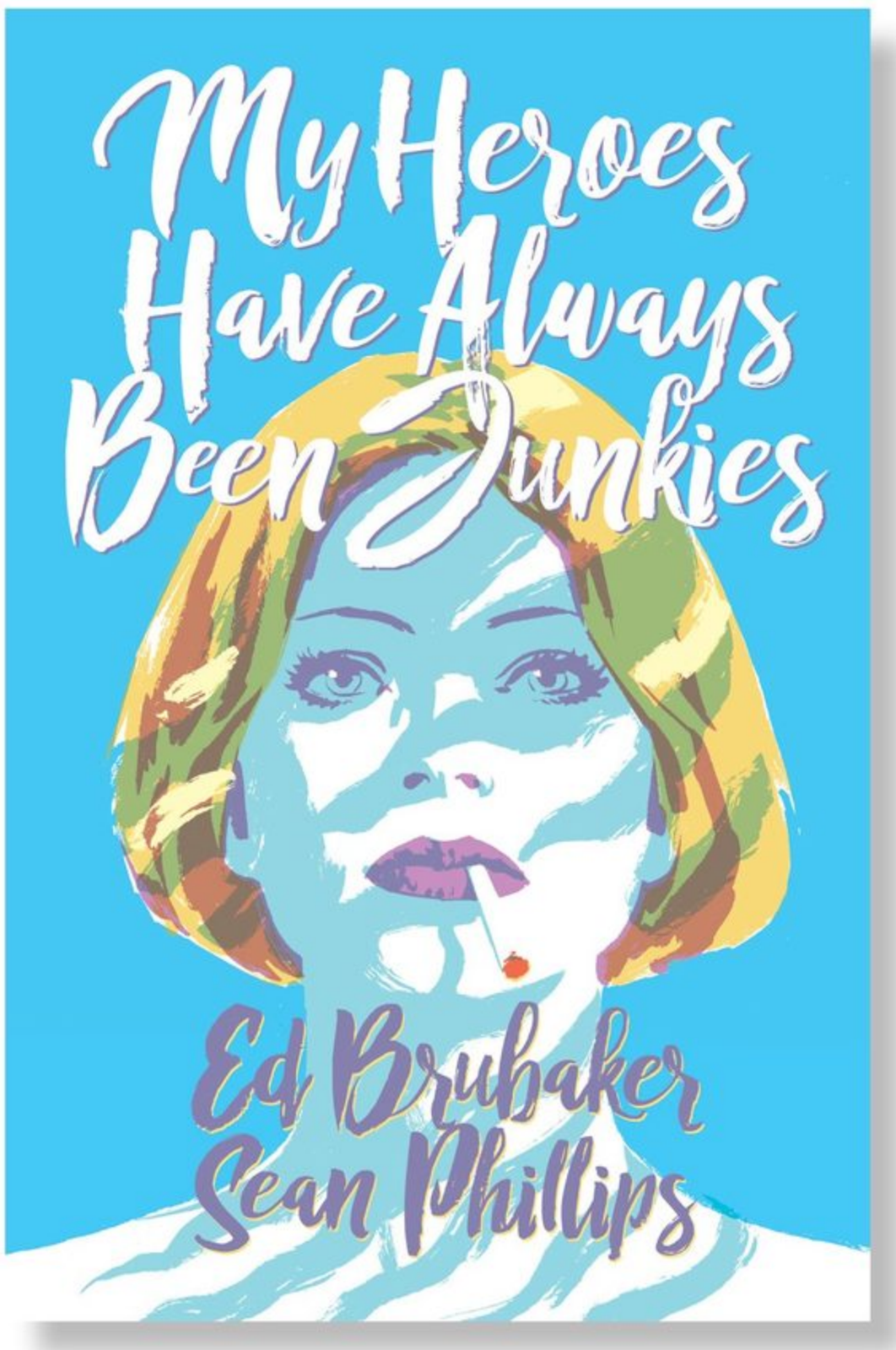
I try to live a wholesome life, avoiding unsavory characters and bad situations as best I can; I read CRIMINAL to explore vicariously the world's dark corners (I suppose that is the charm of all great crime fiction, right?) So in issue 2, when Hal Crane mistakes a cosplayer for a "booth babe" prostitute, it got me wondering whether hiring prostitutes to appear at convention booths was an actual comics industry practice, or merely the gross viewpoint of an old comics pro; could you please elaborate?

Also, in some future issue, I would love to see one of your characters getting high while reading a vintage 1960s Gold Key DANNY DAGGER AND THE FANTASTICALS comic.

Cicero Tweed

That scene with Hal and the cosplayer was more about the changing times in comics in the late-1990s. In the early days of conventions, when you would see people dressed as comic characters, it was usually a paid model, not a fan who made their own costume out of love of the character – except for the costume contests.

Over the years, though, I heard rumors about that old convention scene and if you believe the stories, there was prostitution going on here and there. There's a story about an inker back in the 1970s who was mobbed-up, and would hire prostitutes for private parties that artists and editors would go to – I've heard that one a few times from different people over the years, but never from anyone who actually went to them. Man, I feel like Kenneth Anger here, trading in rumors. I don't know if stuff like this goes on at conventions much now, but about ten years back, there was a prostitution bust at a con back East, and that wasn't that long ago.



But really, it was more about what a guy of Hal's generation would think of the early days of cosplay, and how he would misunderstand it in a vulgar way. So, like you said, the gross viewpoint of an old pro.

***

Okay, up this month in our back pages, Kim Morgan brings us a great piece about THE COLOR OF MONEY, and Sean illustrates, beautifully, as usual.

***

I forgot to mention last issue that Diamond voted MY HEROES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN JUNKIES as the best original graphic novel of 2018. Thanks to all the retailers who voted for us, and if you haven't checked out the book yet, give it a look. It's only available in this beautiful hardback.

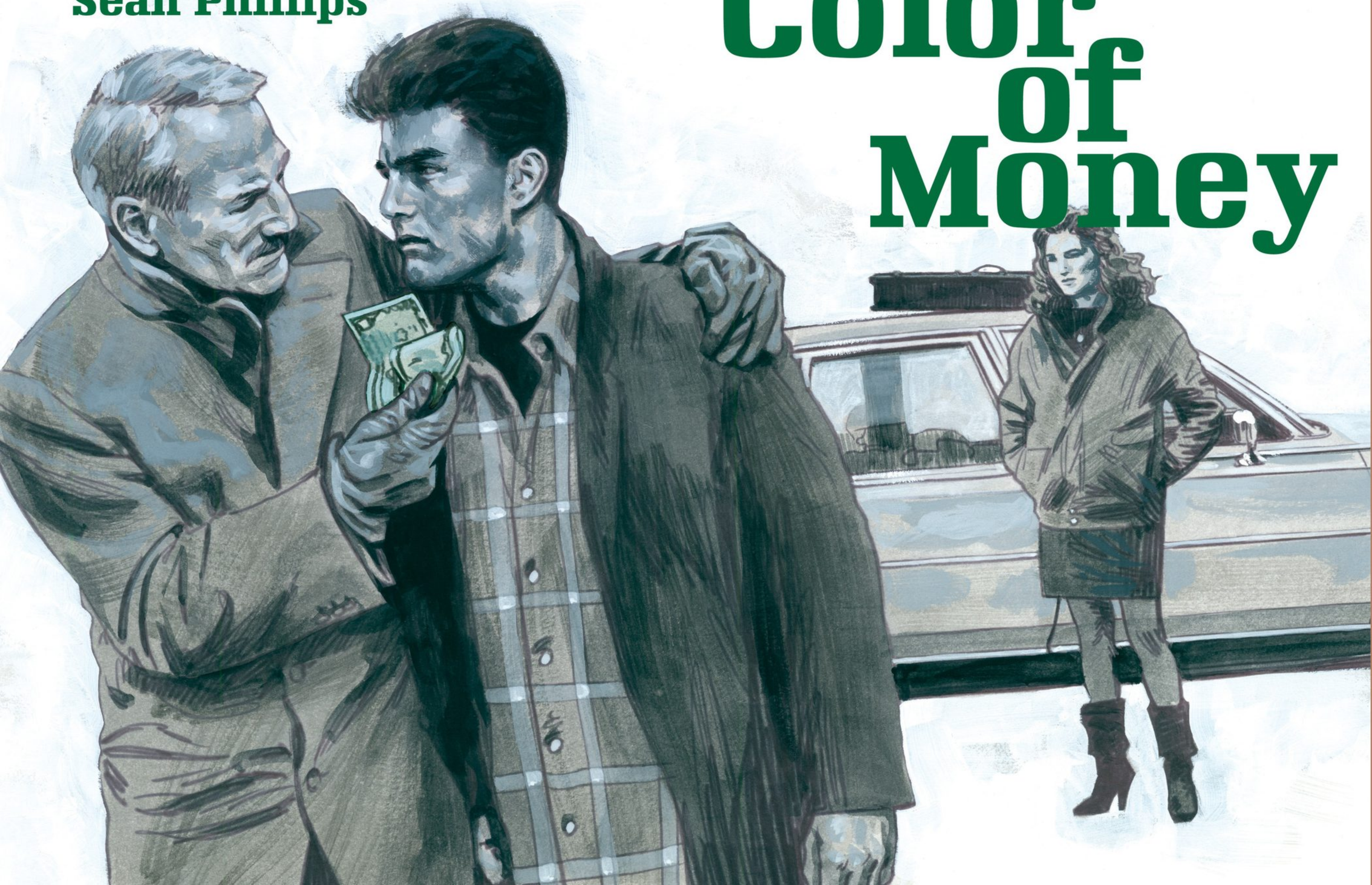
***

All right, that's it for this issue. Write to us at: criminalcomic@gmail.com and ask some questions for the next letter's page.

We'll be back in a month with a single issue story about Ricky Lawless, and you can find its cover on the next page…

The Color of Money

by
Kim Morgan
illustrated by
Sean Phillips



"Life is on the wire; the rest is just waiting."
– Karl Walenda

"On the snap, Vincent!" This is uttered to pool player and obnoxious kid, Vincent Lauria, by his manager girlfriend, Carmen, almost like a boxing trainer, in a smoky bar on a regular night of nothing particularly special in the 1980s. Phil Collins "One More Night" plays on the soundtrack (and presumably jukebox) because that's what would be playing in a place like this. But there goes Vincent breaking those balls like a "sledgehammer," as the older man observing him from the bar has said with a mixture of surprise and discovery, even before really *seeing* the kid. The older guy is talking to his lady friend bar owner, discussing the liquor he now sells, getting kind of cozy and romantic with her about who made her an omelet, and who is going home with her when she gets off (he is). He's a super handsome wizened fella, dressed old-school but cool in a grey suit, sitting in the bar paying half attention to the pool game going on behind him and then… he hears this kid. This damn weird kid who showboats and hoots and does some kind of samurai sword move with this pool cue and plays a video game during his break from the game. Total ADD and tons of immaturity. But… this kid. He's got something special and the older guy knows it right away. It's like falling in love, or finding that thing that will give you a life force… or finding your next victim.

This is all happening at the very beginning of Martin Scorsese's incredibly underrated, under-discussed *The Color of Money* – the camera reacts to Vincent's pool skills and that older man reacts and we react – our senses are heightened, we're perked up, curious, even on edge a little, and we feel *alive*. All from faces and pool balls and that cracking sound. The camera does a vigorous dolly push-in to that older man at the bar, we see him in beautiful close-up, more than curious, a little spellbound but without losing his cool, that man is Fast Eddie Felson (Paul Newman) of the classic *The Hustler* (directed by Robert Rossen, based on the novel by Walter Tevis, as is *The Color of Money*, adapted by Richard Price). Former pool hustler Fast Eddie is going to get back in the game via this kid, Vince (Tom Cruise) and his intelligent girlfriend, Carmen (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) and the movie will become less about the discovery and maturation of greenhorn Vince and more about the simultaneous soul-stirring feelings this kid inspires in his mentor *and* the vampiric victory that mentor can suck out of him. The victory being – he is simply back to doing what he loves.

This film has been unfavorably compared by some critics to a cheesy perfunctory training film of the 1980s – as if Martin Scorsese, needing money and working as a director for hire, had directed *The Karate Kid* (nothing against *The Karate Kid*) but it's so much more interior than that, so much less easily heartfelt (in a good way), so much stranger and real-life and haunting. The nostalgia of Fast Eddie is cagier, there really *is* no nostalgia to it, and Newman, brilliantly, never plays his character that way. He's neither a sleaze nor a perfect father figure nor a "let's all be in awe of this guy" type. He's like a lot of dads or mentors or lovers – he's fucked up and selfish but smart and world-weary and maybe was the best at one time and you *should* listen to him when he's being wise about things but you also really, really, sometimes should be wary of this man too.

Fast Eddie asks Vince and Carmen out for dinner and over not too-long of a time, he starts to get to know both of them. Carmen is a tough customer, she drove the getaway car when her boyfriend robbed Vince's parents' house (a real meet cute at the police station), but she's smart and she actually listens and takes in advice and Vince works in a big anonymous store wearing a tee-shirt that says VINCE on it (he wears it again while playing pool, a nice touch). What does this kid want to do with his life? And what does Carmen want out of it? Fast Eddie had already sized her up the first night in the bar as he says "Maybe I'm hustling you, maybe I'm not. You don't know, but you should know. If you know that, you know when to say no." She says, "What should I say?" His answer: "You should say no. Why? Because it's too much money and I'm an unknown. *He* should be the unknown. That would be nice. That would be beautiful. You could play around with that. You could control that."

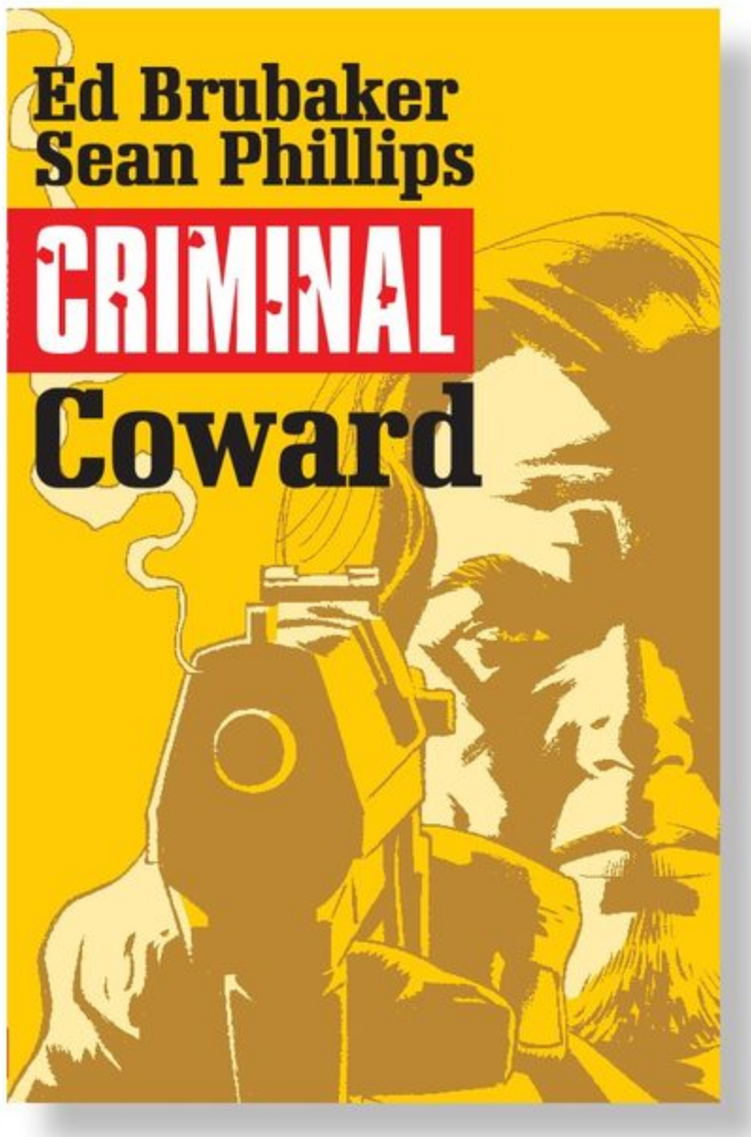
You could control that. Fast Eddie introduces them to a bigger life of pool hustling, which Vince has some issues with (throwing games?!) and soon these three are on their way to a championship in Atlantic city, albeit with a major bump in the road when a humiliated Fast Eddie is scammed by Amos (Forest Whitaker – marvelous) and storms out on them. Mentor no more. Fast Eddie is going to start playing himself – fuck this kid – even if he's grown fond of him.

The movie is so dead and so alive. Almost dead in the right way, when these characters are out there on the streets, driving in cars, talking in cafes – life outside the pool hall is just there and the camera (the film was shot by ace Michael Ballhaus – lot of movement and quick tracking shots and whip pans – so beautiful and thrilling) reflects it in those moments. Static. But when we go into the pool halls, the choreography works like

a musical. Tom Cruise even has a musical number – set to Warren Zevon's "Werewolves of London," and it's so ridiculous and wonderfully embarrassing and like the werewolf's hair: perfect. Cruise is so human and strange in the way a kid like this might be – he's cocky and needy and when he tries hard to be cool, it comes off just… bizarre. Damaged. Newman is cool personified – the coolest motherfucker in the room, in fact – but he's getting older and he needs his mojo back. Seeing sticks all the time, it's easy to think of (sorry to be less delicate about it) getting it up. Phallic. Tom Cruise is like Viagra for this guy. But it also feels like two gunfighters, two samurais, the young gun and the master facing off, swords for pool cues (and again, Vince and all of his showboating sword-twirling with the stick). And so, when the film ends and these two are about to duel – we don't know what will happen. And that was the best way to end this movie, I don't care what any critic says.

When the picture freeze-frames on Fast Eddie and he says, "Hey. I'm back!" this could be so corny but … it's so not. He is back, not because we're simply cheering on his glory, but because he's drunk on the blood. That blood that Vincent provided for him. He was right when he sized up Vincent in the beginning and called him a "character." Vincent initially takes this as a compliment but Eddie says, "That's not what I said, kid. I said you *are* a natural character; you're an incredible flake. But that's a gift. Guys spend half their lives inventing that."

Fast Eddie needed that character and he needed that flake to get to where he is by the end of the picture. He's been one hell of a mentor, and he's wise and wonderful in many ways, yes, but he also needed to fuel himself. It's life-affirming, sure, but it's also life-sucking and selfish. And that's why I never see this picture as some kind of inspiring story about two guys learning from each other – even if they do learn. In an interview with Richard Schickel, Scorsese put it beautifully: "I wanted it to be a story of an older person who corrupts a young person, like a serpent in the garden of innocence."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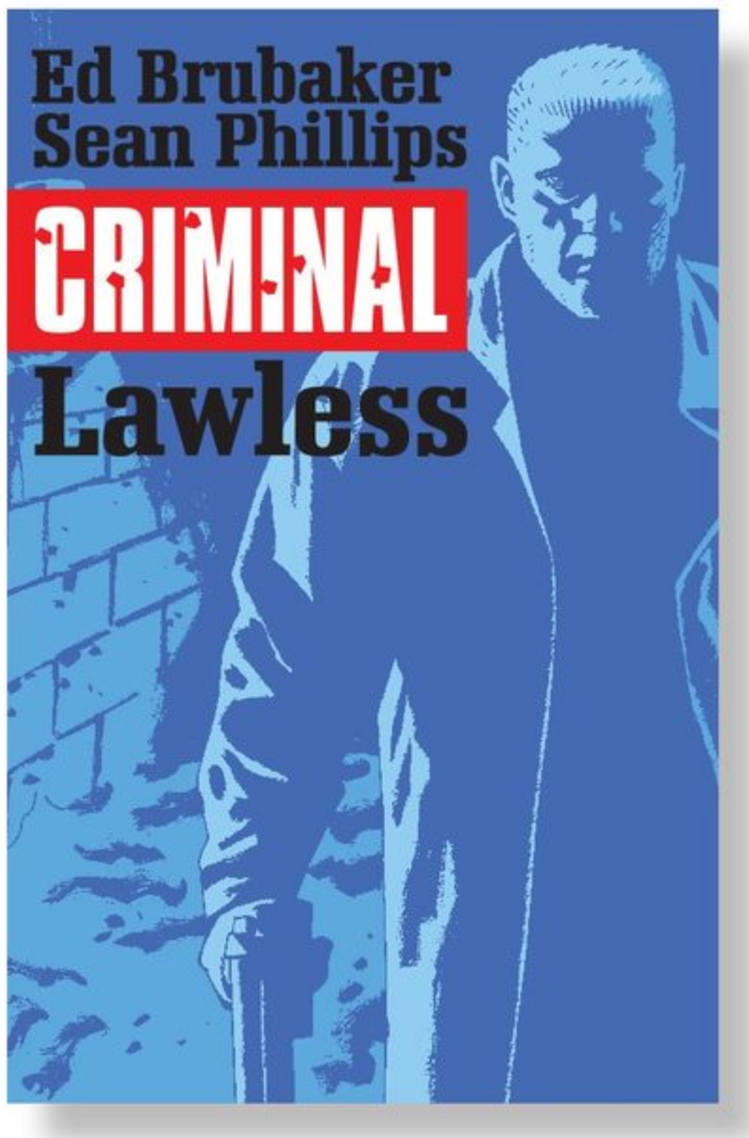
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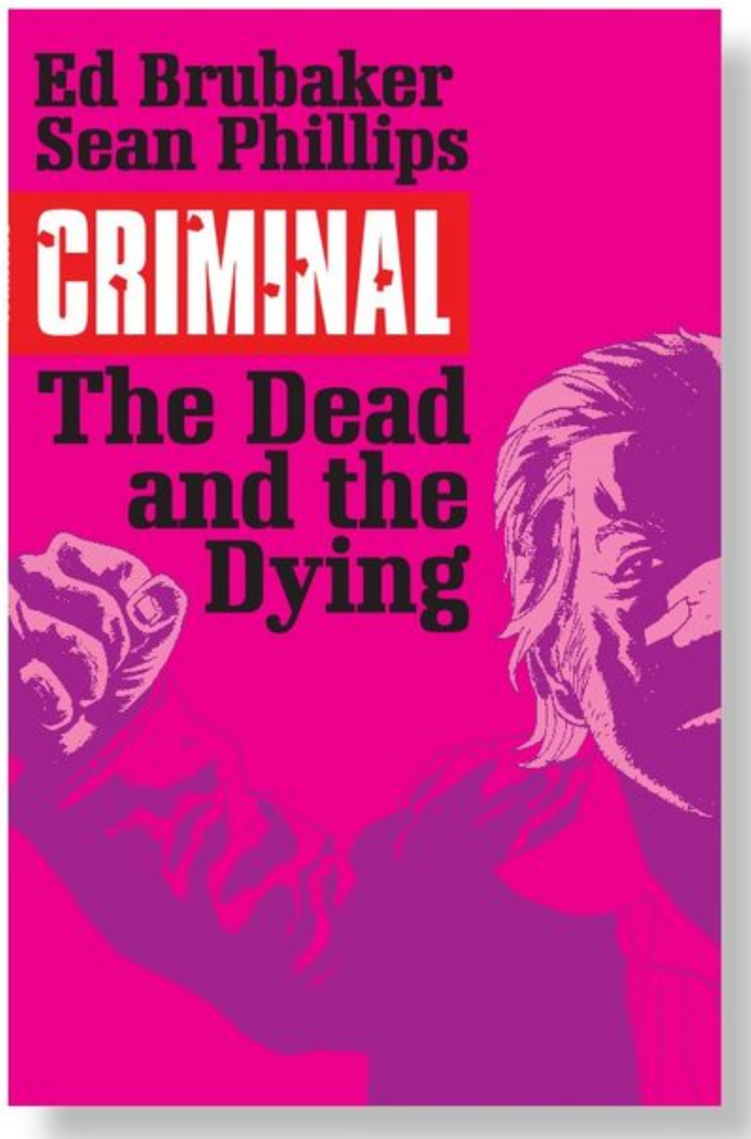
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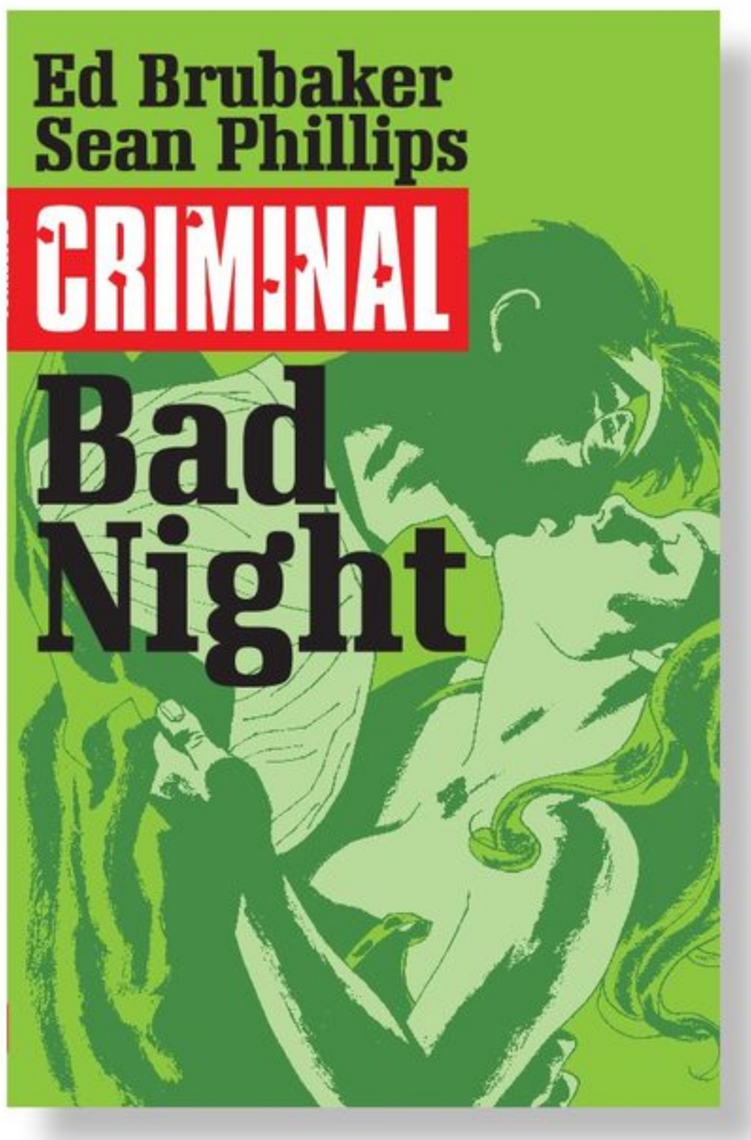
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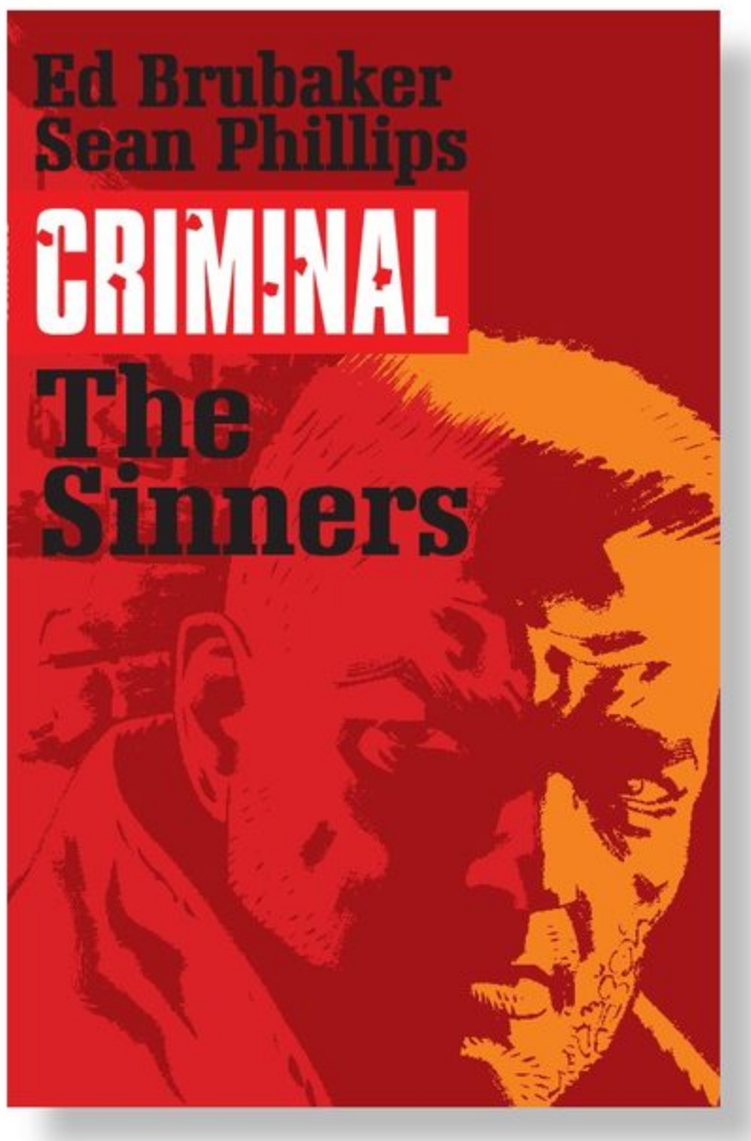
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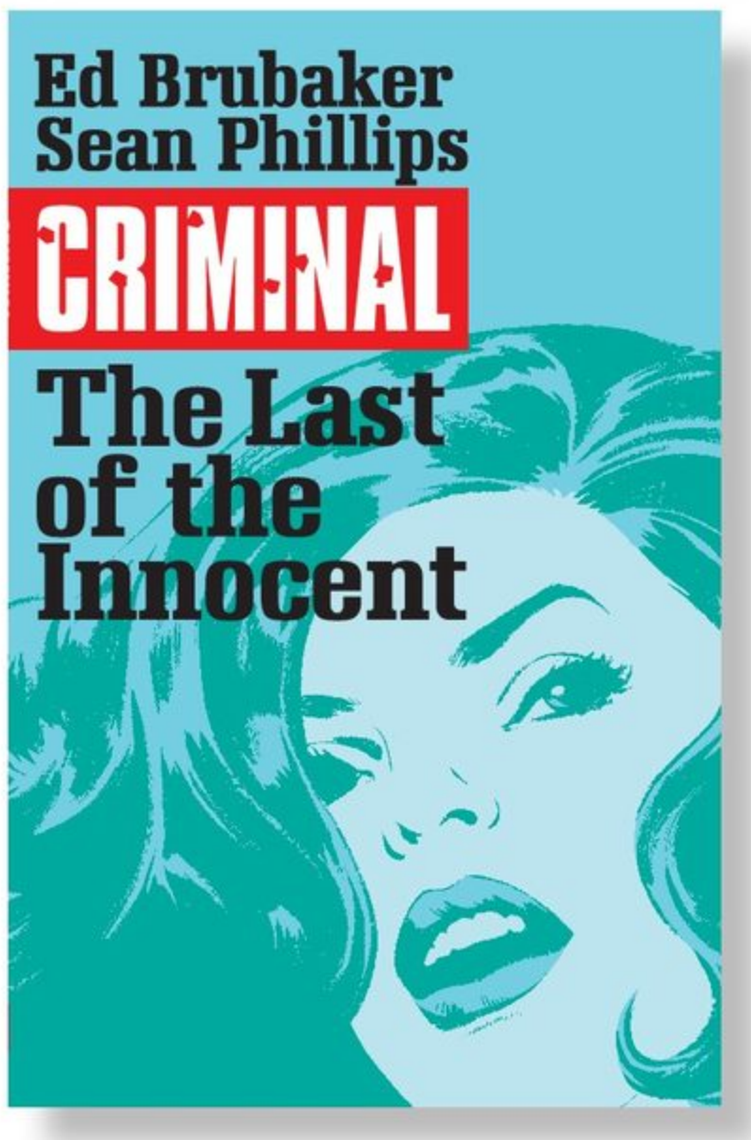
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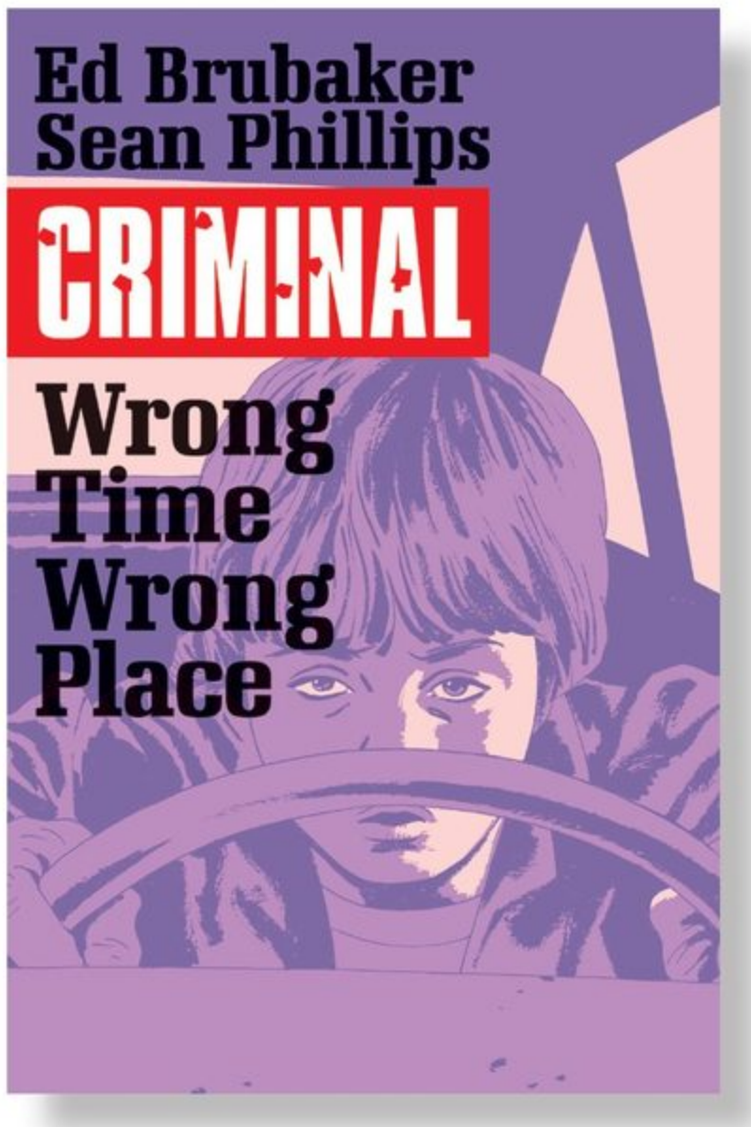
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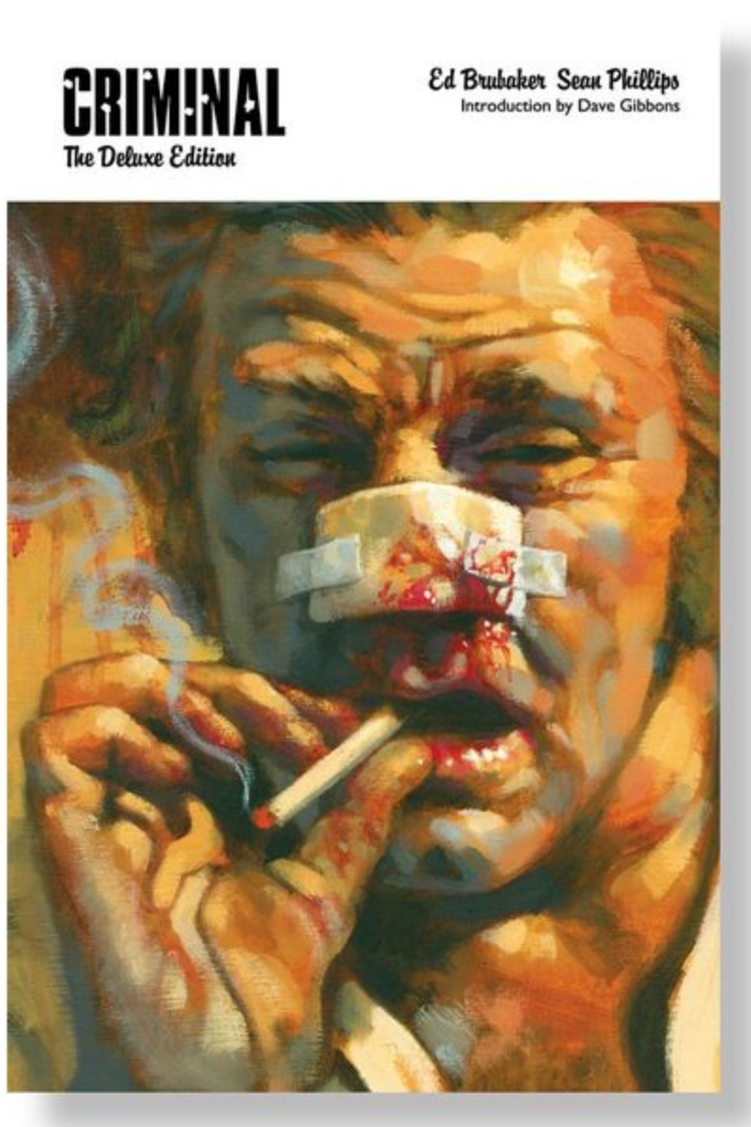
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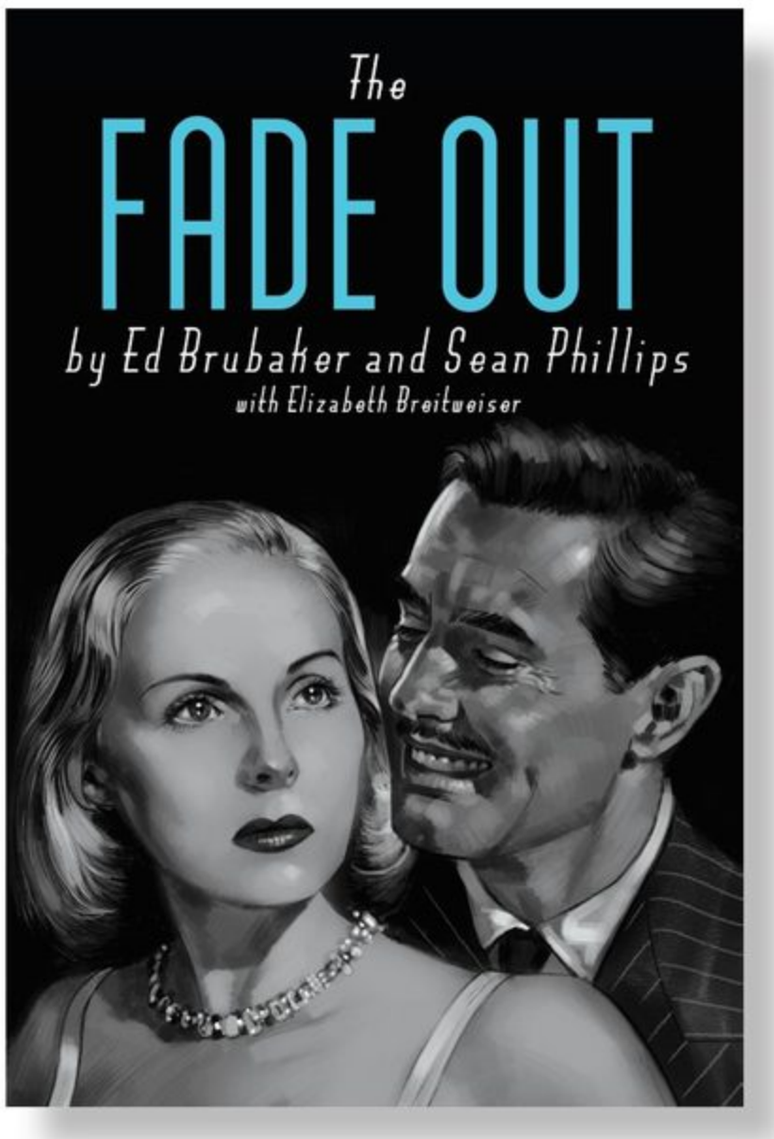

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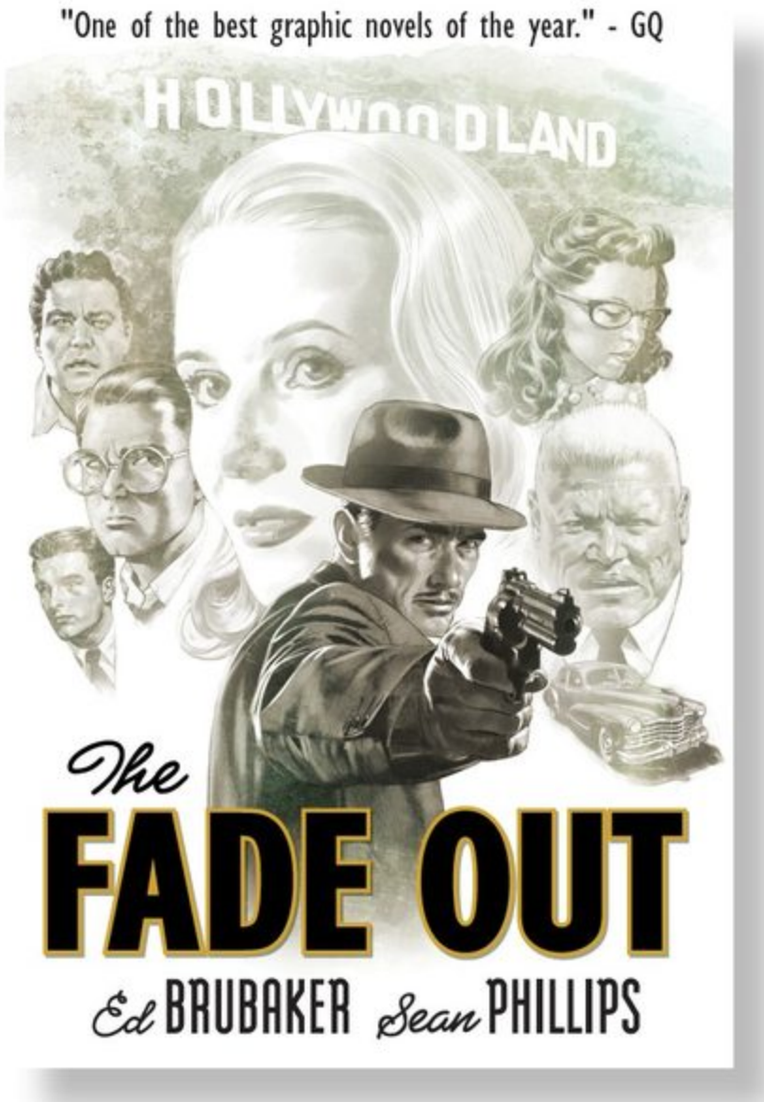

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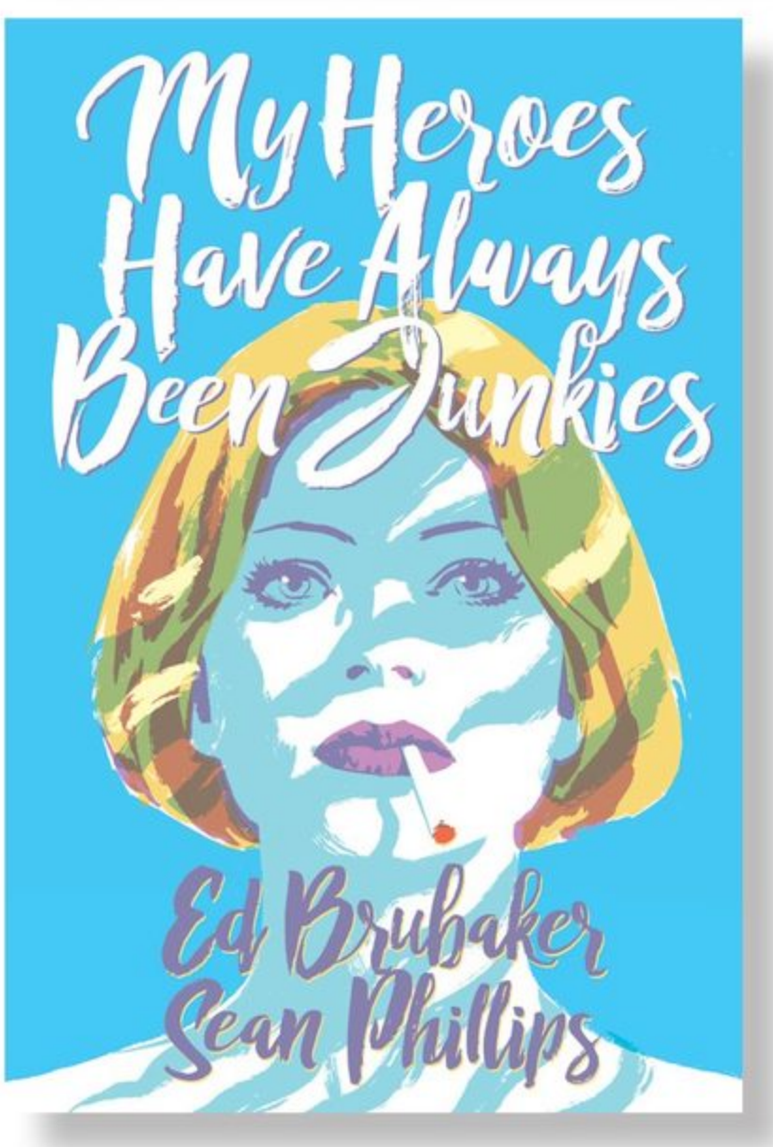

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